

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ABUJA 000233

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: THE ALEX EKWUEME FACTOR

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER.

REASON: 1.5 (G).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During an extensive January 9 conversation with Ambassador Jeter, defeated PDP contestant Alex Ekwueme did not "recognize" Obasanjo's convention victory. Ekwueme contended that Obasanjo's victory was the result of bribes, political threats and chicanery regarding the actual delegate voting. Notwithstanding his displeasure, Ekwueme asserted he would remain in the PDP but would retire to the life of an elder, inactive statesman. Ekwueme described the ANPP convention as even worse than the PDP's and its selection of former Head of State Buhari as abysmal. No self-respecting Christian would vote for Buhari, he declared. His professions of retirement could not mask Ekwueme's desire to stay in the game. Rankled by Obasanjo's "thefts" of the 1999 and 2003 PDP mandates and pressured by supporters, the former Vice President will kick up as much dust as he can. On January 15, Ekwueme publicly called for another PDP convention; on January 23, he filed a lawsuit seeking his unlikely dream of a second convention; On January 26, he publicly suggested the formation of a broad "coalition" of parties to combat the PDP. End summary.

HE DID IT TO ME AGAIN!

¶2. (C) Taking a few days respite from the public rostrum in the aftermath of the tumultuous PDP convention, former Vice President Ekwueme emerged on January 9 for a relaxed morning conversation with the Ambassador at the CMR. After the meeting, Ekwueme would start in earnest his initial round of post-convention consultations with various advisors and politicians in and out of the PDP.

¶3. (C) The reserved Ekwueme contended that the PDP convention was blatantly unfair; as in 1999, democracy and the will of the delegates had been hijacked by the influence of money, he lamented. His major allegation was that PDP chairman Audu Ogbeh consorted with the Obasanjo campaign by serially numbering the delegate ballots. Convention voting was to be conducted by secret ballot; however, by numbering the ballots,

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recording the numbered ballots given each state, then having the delegates vote in alphabetical order meant that any delegate's vote could be identified; at the very least, a state's collective vote could be determined. Ekwueme maintained that this procedure effectively eliminated the secrecy of the ballot. Coupled with blatant political threats by the Presidency, this caused many governors and hundreds of delegates to change their minds. People voted for Obasanjo because they feared the consequences, Ekwueme explained. (Comment: Hakeem Baba-Ahmed, Secretary of the Independent National Electoral Commission, told us that INEC had advised the PDP Chairman prior to the convention against numbering the ballots. INEC correctly thought the numbering would give rise to suspicions of vote tracking, Baba-Ahmed recalled. INEC observed the PDP and other parties' national conventions pursuant to its constitutional mandate to monitor party activities. End Comment.)

¶4. (C) Ekwueme claimed he would have sought to postpone the convention if apprised beforehand of the numbered ballots. However, he had accepted at face value PDP Chairman Ogbeh's pre-convention pledge to ensure the integrity of the vote. Thus, Ekwueme went into the convention confident the balloting would truly be secret. However, he was flabbergasted when

it was announced that Abia State, the first delegation to vote, was given ballots numbered 1-95. Ekweume sent supporters to find out what was happening. When they reported that the ballots were numbered, he felt victimized by cruel deception. At that point, Ekweume had to decide whether to disrupt the convention by walking out or to stay put and contain his frustration and sense of betrayal. Ekweume told the Ambassador that his sense of decorum ultimately kept him seated. Discounting remonstrations that his post-convention criticism was nothing but a loser's lament, Ekweume said he did not regret his decision remain at the convention. Walking out would have signaled surrender. Moreover, Ekweume argued that the timing of his complaint could neither enhance nor diminish its validity. If the vote was unduly influenced, that conclusion remained valid regardless of when the hue and cry was raised.

15. (C) Ekweume mentioned other problems with the balloting. Customarily, contestants appear in alphabetical order on the ballot paper. This time, the President appeared first despite his surname. Additionally, Senator Ike Nwachukwu remained on the ballot although he had defected to the NDP (and would become that party's presidential nominee.) Ekweume and Nwachukwu were next to each other on the ballot. Because the PDP used photographs of both men in traditional Igbo attire, the two challengers may have looked the same on the ballot, a potential source of confusion for delegates.

16. (C) Comment: Ekweume was correct that he appeared to be ahead early in the convention and that money, blandishments and political threats turned his once firm position into dust. However, numbered ballots were not his downfall. The change had taken place before then, on Saturday when VP Atiku let everyone know his lot was cast with Obasanjo. Atiku controlled the key governors who, in turn, controlled the delegates. With Atiku back in line, the vote would become a formality, the numbered ballots a form of unneeded insurance. Moreover, Ekweume's accusations downplay some important facts. Ekweume's campaign was not pristine. Credible reports indicate that his supporters were not above giving delegates money and making promises in exchange for support. If Ekweume's team had possessed the tools of political intimidation, it probably would have used them. Ekweume played the game but he simply could not play it as hard as Obasanjo; thus, it is insufficient to state that convention delegates succumbed to enticement and coercion.

17. (C) Comment Cont: Moreover, the total number of ballots nullified because Nwachukwu's name was selected numbered fewer than 20. Obasanjo defeated Ekweume by nearly 2000 votes. In the final analysis, Ekweume entered the race late and briefly scented victory because of widespread unhappiness with Obasanjo. If Ekweume's support had been firmer, more delegates would have stuck with him despite the pressure applied by Obasanjo. Last, one of Ekweume's big problems was that many political elites in the PDP did not trust him on the delicate question of Nigerian's territorial integrity. Because Ekweume is an Igbo, the historical specter of Biafra came into play. We have heard many politicians state that Nigeria is not yet ready for an Igbo President. End Comment.

18. (C) Finally, Ekweume acknowledged that his failure to persuade Atiku to abandon Obasanjo was a severe blow. He and Atiku passed messages several times during the convention, with Ekweume offering Atiku the second spot on his ticket. At first, Atiku apparently wanted to run himself but was precluded because he never filed a nomination form, Ekweume told the Ambassador. Atiku then seemed ready to explore teaming with Ekweume. Denying press reports that he tried to seduce Atiku by pledging to retire in mid-term, Ekweume said his desire would have been to resign from the Presidency around his 74th birthday (November 2006) with 5-6 months left in office. He would have done all he could by then, he offered. In stepping aside, he would make room for a smooth transition by making it clear he would not seek re-election. (Comment: No matter how the scheme is described or what motives are ascribed, the practical result of an early resignation would be Atiku ascending to the Presidency and running as the incumbent in 2007. There is no way around the fact

that Ekwueme dangled the early retirement option to entice Atiku. End Comment.)

19. (C) In the end, Atiku was too frightened that Obasanjo would destroy him politically, Ekwueme believed. The former Vice President also discounted rumors that NSA Aliyu Mohammed had been a potential running mate. Ekwueme stated that he never talked to Mohammed about this possibility. He attributed the speculation of a link between him and Mohammed to the latter's close ties with former Head of State Babangida. Ekwueme said he had received tentative support from Babangida but very strong support from former Head of State Abdulsalami Abubakar, Babangida's close friend. Ekwueme observed that Babangida's support was lukewarm because of Babangida's obsession for maintaining all his options for as long as possible. Babangida hated to choose a sole course of action unless absolutely sure of success. While this craftiness might work in military government, it was not well suited for a more democratic environment where others, simply by acting, took advantage of the space opened by Babangida's indecision. (Comment: In the end, Ekwueme was abandoned by Babangida and Abdulsalami who was conveniently abroad during the PDP convention. End Comment.)

ANPP TO THE RESCUE

10. (C) Both Obasanjo and the PDP were politically wounded by the conduct of the convention. However, the ANPP convention helped salve those wounds. First, the ANPP erred by trying to force through a "consensus" candidate who was the choice of the ANPP governors rather than the party's grassroots. Ekwueme chuckled that the ANPP confab was made to look more contrived than the PDP when the Southern candidates left after the ANPP hierarchy had tapped Buhari. Moreover, Buhari's selection made matters worst by confirming the widespread impression that the ANPP was Northern dominated. Marking Buhari a religious bigot, Ekwueme said no decent Christian would vote for him. Ekwueme did not think Buhari had a chance of winning because he lacked support in the South and his running mate Chuba Okagidbo would not attract much. Ekwueme commented that, although he would not campaign actively for Obasanjo, he would vote for the President not Buhari. Still, Ekwueme rueful that Nigeria's two main parties had settled on two former military leaders with autocratic dispositions. With the emergence of Buhari, Ekwueme feared the presidential campaign could acquire combative religious, regional and ethnic overtones.

WHAT NEXT GENTLEMAN ALEX

11. (C) Although not ready to toss his towel into the ring and publicly concede victory to Obasanjo, Ekwueme told the Ambassador that he would withdraw from active politics, return to Anambra state and "do nothing" for a while.

COMMENT

12. (C) Despite the clear statement that he would retire, Ekwueme did not appear ready to leave the playing field. His quiet demeanor could not mask the fight still left in him. After having lost two consecutive conventions to Obasanjo, it should not be surprising that Ekwueme would harbor resentment and might be planning ways to scuttle Obasanjo's ambitions. Instead of an early retirement, we believe Ekwueme will do his best to stir the pot, either to win concessions from the PDP or, as a last resort, to strengthen the challenge that other parties may present the President. Recent events have borne out these expectations.

13. (C) Earlier this month, Ekwueme filed a lawsuit seeking a second convention; few people give this quixotic lawsuit a chance. Trying to increase the political pressure on the PDP, Ekwueme told supporters

after meeting the UNPP's flagbearer Senator Jim Nwobodo in Enugu that Nigerians should "make the necessary sacrifice to get the country back on the track of democracy." "Sacrifice could come in different ways, including the formation of coalitions by the political parties to ensure that democracy was achieved in the country," Ekwueme reportedly said. While Ekwueme probably does not intend to campaign against Obasanjo, he is sending a signal to the President that he must not be ignored.

¶14. (C) While many think Ekwueme will bolt from the PDP, it is more likely that he may be fishing for political concessions from Obasanjo, such as appointments for key supporters. This is something Ekwueme did not do in 1999. If this is his ploy and if successful, it will enable him to maintain influence in the party and the government.

¶15. (C) Ekwueme's actions have little leverage unless they carry the implicit threat that he might defect. Thus, defection remains possible. During his conversation with the Ambassador, Ekwueme downplayed his relationship with Babangida and NSA Aliyu Mohammed. He might be working more closely with them than he would have us believe. However, Ekwueme is not a Babangida fan; their relationship would be an anti-Obasanjo marriage of convenience that Ekwueme would have no pride in acknowledging. Babangida and Mohammed may or may not have encouraged Ekwueme to file the lawsuit. However, they probably will encourage Ekwueme to leave the PDP if the suit fails. Babangida neither wants Atiku to be Vice President nor does he want Buhari to become head of state in 2003. Thus, IBB must find a credible alternative. Alex Ekwueme could help forge one if not become that alternative himself. While his mind knows that challenging Obasanjo in the general election would be a steep challenge, Ekwueme could be persuaded to become a leading member of an anti-Obasanjo coalition if he does not receive some political concessions from the PDP.

JETER